



THE DUCHESS OF MALFI JOHN WEBSTER

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RESEARCHED & WRITTEN BY
KATY BROOKSBANK

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

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THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

JOHN WEBSTER



Madeline Appiah
CARIOLA



Harry Attwell
MARQUIS OF PESCARA



Tom Bateman
ANTONIO BOLOGNA



Eve Best
DUCHESS OF MALFI



Nari Blair-Mangat
RODERIGO



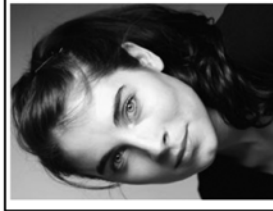
Mark Bonnar
DANIEL DE BOSOLA



Adam Burton
SILVIO



Vyelle Croom
MALATESTA



Lucy Eaton
LADY IN WAITING



Taylor James
GRISOLAN



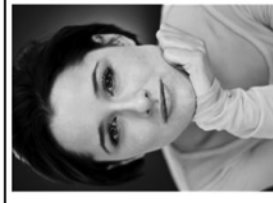
Tunji Kasim
DELIO



Harry Lloyd
FERDINAND



Finbar Lynch
THE CARDINAL OF
ARAGON



Iris Roberts
JULIA



Alan Westaway
DOCTOR &
CASTRUCCIO

JOHN WEBSTER BIOGRAPHY

Very little is known about the life of John Webster including even the exact dates of his birth and death. He was the son of a successful carriage maker in London and scholars surmise that he was born in approximately 1580, near Cow Lane, Smithfield, in the parish of St Sepulchre, where the family business was. His father, also John Webster, married his mother Elizabeth Coates, a blacksmith's daughter, in 1577 and it is assumed their son John was born not long after, however parish records were destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666, and as such any hard evidence has been erased. It is likely that Webster attended the respected Merchant Taylor's School (the guild of which his father belonged to) and then went on to study as a student of law at the Middle Temple, London (one of the Inns of Court) in 1598. We will never know for sure whether this really was the playwright and poet John Webster who was registered as having studied there, but this does seem feasible given his connections to certain Templars and his knowledge of law, evident within his plays.

Perhaps the first known record of Webster was supplied in 1602 by theatre owner Philip Henslowe who describes his collaboration on a now-lost play entitled *Caesar's Fall* with a group of other writers including Thomas Middleton. It would appear Webster continued as a hack writer for several years, learning his trade on the production line, as it were, which kept the Jacobean stage supplied with new plays. During his many decades associated with the London stage, it is highly likely that Webster was also active in the family's flourishing transport enterprise, thereby supplementing his relatively small earnings as a writer. Webster's first known works date from 1604 during which he adapted and wrote an Introduction for the revival of John Marston's *The Malcontent*, and collaborated with Thomas Dekker on *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* and the comedy *Westward Ho*. The satire was 'answered' by Jonson, Marston and Chapman with their *Eastward Ho*, then once again Webster and Dekker joined forces in retaliation with *Northward Ho* in 1605. The historical play *Appius and Virginia*, written in approximately 1627 and accredited to Webster was most likely a collaboration with Thomas Heywood.

It would seem Webster's first solo outing as a playwright was *The White Devil*, which later became known as a masterpiece. This was then followed by his other masterpiece *The Duchess of Malfi*. The former was poorly received when it was performed by the Queen's Men in approximately 1608, but Webster was not discouraged - when it was published in 1612, Webster included a preface which attributed its failure to the weather, the shoddy condition of the theatre and an audience he described as 'ignorant asses'. His next play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, written in 1614, was met with far more success when performed by a rival company the King's Majesty's Servants at the private Blackfriars Theatre, thereby justifying Webster's estimation of his ability as a playwright.

In March 1606, Webster married Sara Peniall and not long after, their first child John was born. It is known that Webster and Peniall went on to have at least three more children, Margery, Sara and Elizabeth, but again, records of their births have been lost. The following twenty years yield little information about Webster other than that it was clear he never really equalled the success of his first two plays. It is curious and somewhat of a shame that Webster seems to have focused more on collaborations since his efforts as a solo writer registered far greater acclaim.

Unfortunately, as so much of the life and works of John Webster has either been lost or destroyed over time, all we have to go on is circumstantial evidence. There will always remain conflicting ideas as to when his plays and prose were written. When cross-referencing what little information we have on Webster, there are often significant deviations as to dates and places, and as such, the information supplied here should only be used as an approximate guide.

CHRONOLOGY

JOHN WEBSTER'S CAREER

- c.1580** – John Webster is born in Smithfields, London.
- c.1590** – Webster attends Merchant Taylor's School.
- 1598** – Enrols as law student at Middle Temple.
- 1602** – Webster collaborates with Drayton, Dekker, Middleton and Munday to write *Caesar's Fall*. He writes *Christmas Comes But Once a Year* with Dekker.
- 1603** – Queen Elizabeth I dies; James I (James VI of Scotland) is crowned King.
- 1604** – Webster adapts and writes introduction for Marston's *The Malcontent*. He also writes *Lady Jane* and *Westward Ho* with Dekker.
- 1605** – Webster writes *Northward Ho* with Dekker.
- 1606** – Webster marries Sara Peniall and they have their first child, John.
- 1607** – Webster writes *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* with Dekker (possibly a reworking of the 1604 play *Lady Jane*).
- 1608** – *The White Devil* (published 1612), is performed at the Red Bull Theatre, London.
- 1610** – *The Devil's Law Case* MAY have been written (possibly in 1619 though)
- 1614** – Webster writes *The Duchess of Malfi*, it is performed to a private audience at the Blackfriars Theatre.
- 1616** – Webster writes *Guise* (exact date and genre of the play unknown)
- 1621** – Webster writes *Anything for a Quiet Life* with Middleton.
- 1624** – Webster collaborates with Rowley to write *Cure for a Cuckold*. He also writes *Keep The Widow Waking* with Ford, Rowley and Dekker, and *The Thracian Wonder* with Rowley.
- 1625** – Webster writes *The Fair Maid of the Inn* with Fletcher, Ford and Massinger.
- 1627** – Webster writes *Appius and Virginia*.
- 1634** – It is believed John Webster died before the end of 1634.

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

NOTABLE PRODUCTIONS

- pre 1614** – First performed by King's Majesty's Servants, Blackfriars Theatre
- 1618** – Performed again.
- 1630** – Revival at the 'Cockpit in Court', Whitehall, before the King.
- 1662/68/72** – The Duke's Company of female actors with Mrs Barry as the Duchess, Mrs Betterton as Bosola.
- 1707** – Performed at the Queen's Theatre, Haymarket.
- 1773** – An adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi* (*The Fatal Secret*) performed in Covent Garden.
- 1850** – An adaptation by R.H Horne performed at Sadler's Wells.
- 1892** – An adaptation by William Poel is performed.
- 1919** – The Phoenix Society performs at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith.
- 1924** – The Marlowe Society performs at Cambridge.
- 1945** – Performed at the Haymarket Theatre, London with Peggy Ashcroft as the Duchess and John Gielgud as Ferdinand.
- 1960** – Peggy Ashcroft reprises her role with Eric Porter as Ferdinand, for the RSC, Stratford.
- 1970** – Judi Dench is the Duchess, Richard Pasco is Antonio, at the RSC, Stratford.
- 1980** – Helen Mirren is the Duchess, Bob Hoskins is Bosola at the Manchester Royal Exchange.
- 1985** – Eleanor Bron is the Duchess, Ian McKellen is Bosola at the National Theatre, London.
- 1989** – Harriet Walter is the Duchess at the National Theatre, London.
- 2003** – Janet McTeer is the Duchess at the National Theatre, London.

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

SYNOPSIS

1504, Amalfi, Italy. Before a backdrop of religious and moral corruption, the widowed Duchess defies her brothers' orders not to remarry. The subsequent atrocities inflicted on her and on those she holds dear are too much to bear but as the horrors repeat on themselves, integrity and virtue prevail.

The play is set in the court of Malfi (Amalfi), Italy in approximately 1504-1510.

The recently widowed Duchess of Malfi is forbidden by her brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, to remarry. Defying them, she seeks a clandestine alliance with her steward, Antonio. He accepts her advances and they are secretly married. Meanwhile, the Duchess' brothers enlist Bosola, a recently released convict, to monitor their sister's actions.

Nine months later and the Duchess is pregnant with Antonio's child. They disguise her pregnancy but Bosola discovers the ruse and informs Ferdinand, who is outraged. However, the brothers choose to refrain from revenge until they know who fathered the child.

The Duchess and Antonio have two more children before Ferdinand visits his sister. Ferdinand contrives a late visit to the Duchess' bedchamber where he confronts her with her indiscretions. She reveals her marriage, but not who her husband is, and Ferdinand declares it unacceptable. The Duchess, to save her husband Antonio, publicly condemns and exiles him, claiming that he failed to pay certain bills, thereby removing him from harm. She plans on joining him shortly in exile.

The Duchess mistakenly takes Bosola into her confidence and, acting on his advice, she goes to the shrine of Loretto, before joining Antonio. At the same time, Bosola travels to Naples, informing Ferdinand of the Duchess' plans and Antonio's role. Ferdinand pursues them.

After reuniting with Antonio and revealing their marriage to her household, the Duchess' staff desert her. Bosola, clearly in the service of Ferdinand, brings a letter subtly demanding Antonio's death. After Bosola leaves carrying her refusal to her brother, the Duchess urges Antonio to take their eldest son and escape to Milan.

Bosola returns to take the Duchess prisoner. Once captured, Ferdinand's revenge on the Duchess is a series of horrible indignities as he attempts to drive her mad and presents her with the hand of Antonio, declaring he and her son are dead. Finally, on her brothers' orders, Bosola strangles the Duchess and her two youngest children. In the last moments of her life, Bosola repents his involvement, revealing that Antonio still lives. Bosola then overhears the Cardinal plotting to kill him and so visits the darkened chapel in order to kill the Cardinal at his prayers. Instead, he mistakenly kills Antonio who has just returned to Malfi to attempt a reconciliation with the Cardinal. Bosola finally manages to kill the Cardinal. In the brawl that follows, Ferdinand and Bosola stab each other to death.

Antonio's friend Delio brings in the Duchess and Antonio's eldest son. He is proclaimed ruler of the lands held by his mother and uncles.

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

ACT BREAKDOWN

ACT I

The play opens in the Duchess' audience chamber in Amalfi with Bosola returning from his sentence for murder in the galleys. He converses with the Cardinal but then speaks briefly with Antonio and seems not to trust the Cardinal. Antonio Bologna, the steward of the Duchess' household, who has recently come from France, talks with his friend Delio about the French court and his admiration for the French king who has rewarded those who have been honest and true. Antonio and Delio berate the Duchess' brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, finding them both of an ill and devious nature. Antonio praises the Duchess for her noble virtue.

Ferdinand employs Bosola to spy upon the Duchess as he is set against her marrying again and wishes to know her private intentions. Ferdinand recommends Bosola to the Duchess as the Provisor of her horse and, unaware of her brother's plan, she accepts Bosola into her employ. Ferdinand and the Cardinal make clear to their sister that they do not wish her to remarry.

Despite her brothers' warnings, the Duchess summons Antonio under the pretence that she is going to dictate her will to him. She conceals her lady in waiting, Cariola, as a witness. It soon becomes apparent that the Duchess is proposing to Antonio and she bestows on him her wedding ring. Antonio is well aware that her brothers will not accept their sister's marriage to a man born of lower status but the Duchess assures him that all will be fine. Cariola casts a shadow of doubt on the marriage by pitying the Duchess for her potential madness.

ACT II

The Duchess' palace in Amalfi, nine months later. Bosola, alone, muses that the Duchess may well be pregnant. He is almost convinced of the fact but endeavours to gain proof by sparking her pregnant appetite with a gift of apricots believed, at the time, to induce labour. The Duchess does indeed go into labour and Antonio, realising he has little time to conceal this, invents a ruse that the Duchess' jewels are missing and the palace must be shut up presently and each officer confined to his chamber. Cariola tells Antonio that he is the father of a son. Bosola thinks he has heard the Duchess in labour but is discovered lurking about the palace by Antonio who confronts him and asks why he creeps about during the curfew. Antonio drops a note on his way out which confirms that the Duchess has had a son. Bosola vows to reveal this to Ferdinand and the Cardinal.

The action then crosses to the Cardinal's palace in Rome where it is made clear that the Cardinal and Julia are having an affair. Ferdinand bursts in with the news Bosola has sent him. Both brothers are appalled by the fact that the Duchess has given birth and Ferdinand vows to discover with whom she has had this child.

ACT III

Antonio speaks with Delio who is newly returned from Rome with Ferdinand. Antonio explains that the Duchess has had two more children in his absence. The Duchess enters with Ferdinand, who suggests he has found a husband for her, Count Malatesta. The Duchess spurns this idea and insists she is still not married. Bosola tells Ferdinand she now has three children and that he has acquired a skeleton key to her bedchambers so that Ferdinand may spy on her and get the truth.

The Duchess and Antonio speak within her bedchambers whilst Ferdinand enters and conceals himself. Antonio leaves the Duchess and Ferdinand reveals himself, forcing the hand of the Duchess to admit to whom she is married. The Duchess defends Antonio and her choice in marriage but Ferdinand vows never to set eyes on her again. Bosola enters with news that Ferdinand has fled to Rome. The Duchess, for the sake of Antonio's safety concocts a story for Bosola indicating Antonio has been false with her accounts and he must be exiled to Ancona. Bosola does not believe this and speaks of Antonio as a good and honest man, thus prompting the Duchess to confide in him of their secret marriage. Bosola knows he must pass this information on to Ferdinand and is left on stage to contemplate his role as a spy.

Bosola then interrupts a meeting at the Cardinal's palace in Rome with news of the Duchess. The Cardinal banishes the Duchess, Antonio and their family from Ancona. Later, in a palace in Loreto, the Duchess and Antonio receive word of their banishment and Bosola brings forth a letter from Ferdinand indirectly stating he wants Antonio dead. The Duchess tells Antonio to take their eldest son and flee to Milan for safety as she fears her brothers. Bosola and guards then take the Duchess and her two remaining children captive under the order of her brothers.

ACT IV

The Duchess' palace in Amalfi now serves as her prison. Ferdinand enters with Bosola and is told how bravely the Duchess is dealing with her imprisonment. This is not to Ferdinand's satisfaction and he asks Bosola to tell the Duchess he wishes to speak with her but in the dark. Ferdinand enters the Duchess' room which has been darkened and presents her with a dead man's hand, making her believe it is Antonio's. He then leaves Bosola to present her with images of a fake Antonio and her children as if they were dead. She believes them and her despair is so deep that she resolves to die. Her situation affects Bosola greatly and we begin to see signs of his guilt and remorse. The Duchess and Cariola speak of the dreadful noises they hear echoing throughout the palace. It is that of madmen which Ferdinand has placed within in order to sink the Duchess into greater despair. The Duchess insists that hearing greater grief can only serve to lessen hers. Bosola re-enters disguised as a tomb-maker and tells the Duchess she is to die. Her resolve is strong and she tells Bosola and the executioners to strangle her well, which they do. Cariola re-enters and is strangled too. Ferdinand enters and, seeing the body of the Duchess and her dead children, is in despair. Bosola fears Ferdinand will turn on him and demands payment for his atrocities. Ferdinand questions why Bosola followed his orders to kill the Duchess when he was so obviously upset and says the only payment Bosola will receive will be to not be put to death for the murder. After Ferdinand leaves, the Duchess wakes briefly. Bosola, in a final act of remorse, tells the Duchess that Antonio is not really dead and that he shall pass her body on to the care of good women of the town. The Duchess dies.

ACT V

Outside the Cardinal's palace in Milan. Antonio speaks with Delio about his hopes for a reconciliation with the Cardinal, unaware that the Duchess is dead. Delio warns him against this. Later, inside the palace, a doctor has been summoned to investigate Ferdinand's supposed lycanthropy - he now believes himself to be a wolf and digs up dead bodies at night. The Cardinal and the doctor confront Ferdinand who is seemingly mad and attacks his own shadow. The Cardinal, whilst keeping quiet about his part in the Duchess' death, assigns Bosola with the task of finding Antonio and slaying him. When Bosola leaves, he is accosted by Julia who accuses him of having given her a love potion to make her fall in love with the Cardinal and threatens to kill Bosola to end her love. Bosola disarms Julia and asks her to gather evidence on the Cardinal for him. Julia conceals Bosola as the Cardinal enters. Julia forces information out of the Cardinal regarding his part in the Duchess' death but makes her swear never to tell. He hands her a poisoned bible to kiss and she dies. Bosola reveals himself and confronts the Cardinal but maintains he will still kill Antonio and will also help dispose of Julia's body. The Cardinal gives Bosola a master key to the palace but once Bosola is alone again, he swears to protect Antonio.

Later, outside the same palace, Delio and Antonio speak near the Duchess' tomb. They are interrupted with supposed echoes of the Duchess. Delio leaves to find Antonio's eldest son in the hope that the Cardinal may find mercy and compassion when he sees his nephew and thus pardon Antonio.

Inside the palace again, the Cardinal dissuades the courtiers from keeping watch over Ferdinand. He tells them not to come to Ferdinand's aid if they should hear anything, as he knows that they may hear Antonio struggling with Bosola. They leave reluctantly. Bosola then enters to hear the Cardinal plotting his death. Antonio enters in the dark, unaware of Bosola's presence, to try again with the Cardinal. Bosola stabs Antonio, believing him to be the Cardinal and is horrified by his mistake but manages to tell Antonio of the death of the Duchess and her children. Antonio is happy to die in misery since there is nothing left for him. Bosola resolves to kill the Cardinal and tells him this as he enters. Since the Cardinal has given orders for the guards not to approach if they hear screams, the Cardinal realises he is at the mercy of Bosola. Bosola stabs the Cardinal, then Ferdinand bursts in and also attacks the Cardinal, wounding Bosola accidentally. Bosola stabs Ferdinand. The guards re-enter amid the commotion. The Cardinal dies, then Bosola. Delio enters too late with Antonio's eldest son and laments what has passed, vowing to establish the young man in his mother's right and making him ruler of his mother and uncles' lands.

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

THE DUCHESS

Sister to Ferdinand and the Cardinal and recent widow. She is described as having a sweet countenance, noble virtue and a tenderness and warmth that her brothers lack. She is witty, clever and never outsmarted in dialogue by her brothers. She marries beneath her and has three children with Antonio. Her dignified death shows the contrast with her brothers and the corruption of the court that surrounds her.

THE CARDINAL

The brother to Ferdinand and the Duchess. He is a corrupt official of the Roman Catholic Church, whose intents mirror Ferdinand's in his desire for his sister not to remarry. He knows about Bosola spying on the Duchess although others remain ignorant to his plotting.

FERDINAND

The Duke of Calabria and twin brother of the Duchess. He is an irrational and tempestuous man, often given to fits of rage disproportionate to the 'offence' in question. He is in vehement opposition to his sister remarrying, largely due to greed as upon her death, he will receive her assets. After seeing his dead sister, he regrets hiring Bosola to kill her and eventually loses his sanity, believing himself to be a wolf.

CARIOLA

The Duchess' waiting-woman. She is privy to the Duchess' secrets as she witnesses her marriage and helps deliver her children. She is strangled by Bosola.

JULIA

Wife of Castruccio and mistress of the Cardinal. She dies at the hands of the Cardinal by kissing a poisoned bible.

CASTRUCCIO

An old lord with a much younger wife, Julia.

DOCTOR

Sent to cure Ferdinand of lycanthropia.

DANIEL DE BOSOLA

A former servant of the Cardinal, now returned from a sentence for murder. Bosola is sent by Ferdinand to spy on the Duchess and is eventually involved in the murder of the Duchess, her children, Cariola, Antonio, the Cardinal and Ferdinand himself. As he witnesses the grace and nobility of the Duchess facing her deaths, he has a change of heart as guilt overwhelms him and he then seeks to avenge her.

ANTONIO BOLOGNA

Antonio is the steward of the Duchess of Malfi's palace and has recently returned from France. Honest by nature and a good judge of character, he is full of scorn for the Italian courtiers whom he sees as more corrupt than the French. In accepting the Duchess' marriage proposal, he does because of her character instead of her beauty. He takes neither her title nor her money and lets their union remain a secret, as he is aware her brothers will think ill of her marrying beneath herself. He lacks dynamism and seems unremarkable in comparison to the Duchess.

MALATESTA

A courtier of the Cardinal's court. His name translates to mean 'headache'. At one point Ferdinand refers to him as a potential suitor for the Duchess.

DELIO

A courtier who is the friend and confidante of Antonio. He knows the secrets of Antonio's marriage and of his children, and in many ways acts as the narrator of the play.

PESCARA

A marquis.

RODERGIO, GRISOLAN, SILVIO

Courtiers.

OFFICERS & EXECUTIONERS

ABOUT THE REAL DUCHESS OF MALFI

Both the Duchess and Antonio were, in fact, real historical figures. Born Giorvanna d'Aragon, the Duchess was married in 1493 at the age of 12 to Alfonso Piccolomini, son and heir of the first Duke of Amalfi. Piccolomini succeeded to the Dukedom in 1493 but died of gout in 1498. The Duchess was left widowed with a son and daughter and ruled Malfi as regent with considerable success. Despite French and Spanish invasions, the state flourished. The Duchess was able to pay off debts incurred by her late husband and live prosperously. She had a sister and two brothers, the eldest of whom had a promising career as a soldier before entering the church and becoming a cardinal in 1494.

Antonio Bologna was brought up in the court of Naples. He served Federico, the state's last Aragonian king and followed his master into exile in France. Upon Federico's death, Antonio returned to Naples where he was offered the post of major-domo (master of the house) in the household of the Duchess of Malfi, who herself was of the Royal House of Aragon. The young widow fell quickly and passionately in love with Antonio. Fearing the wrath of her brothers, the Cardinal Lodovico and Carlo (Webster's Ferdinand), she married Antonio in secret, with her waiting woman as the sole witness to the ceremony. In real life, as in Webster's play, their marriage was successfully concealed for some years. The birth of their first child went undetected but the birth of the second caused rumours which, reaching the ears of the Aragonian brothers, led them to set spies to watch their sister. Antonio took his two children to Ancona, leaving the Duchess, who was again pregnant, in her palace. Unbearably lonely, she found an excuse to set out on a pilgrimage to Loretto, from whence she proceeded to join Antonio. Upon her arrival in Ancona, she revealed her marriage to her household and declared that she would renounce her rank and title to live privately with Antonio and their children. One of her astonished servants set out to inform the Cardinal what had happened. The rest deserted her and returned to Amalfi.

At Ancona where their third child was born, the Duchess and her husband were allowed only a few month's peace before the Cardinal of Aragon put pressure on Cardinal Gonzaga, Legate of Ancona to banish Antonio. Having foreseen this, Antonio had made preparations to take refuge with a friend in Siena. As soon as the decree of his banishment was issued in 1511, he set out with the Duchess and their children, thus evading any attempt that might have been made to capture or murder them.

The Cardinal, continuing to exert his influence against them, persuaded the head of Signiory of Siena to expel them. This time, Antonio and his family did not depart so quickly. On their way to Venice, they were intercepted by horsemen. By asserting that her brothers would not harm her in person, the Duchess was able to persuade Antonio to escape with their eldest child. They arrived safely in Milan, probably in the late summer of 1512. There is no evidence to connect the Aragonian brothers with the death of the Duchess but after being taken back to her palace in Amalfi, neither she, her two youngest children nor her waiting woman were ever seen again. Antonio forthwith was constantly warned that his life was in danger, one warning coming from a man named Delio who had heard Antonio's story from a Neopolitan friend. In October in 1513, Delio and a companion passed Antonio on their way to mass. A few minutes later, an uproar was heard. Looking back, Delio and his friend realised that Antonio had been stabbed to death by a Lombard captain called Daniele de Bozola and three accomplices. All four escaped.

Alfonso, the Duchess' son by her first marriage, ruled as Duke of Malfi until his death in 1559.

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

THE JACOBEOAN STAGE

‘Jacobean’ derives from the Latin word ‘Jacobus’ which translates to ‘James’ in English – hence the ‘Jacobean’ era refers to the period in English and Scottish history when James VI reigned. He was King of Scots at the age of thirteen months in 1567 following his mother’s (Mary, Queen of Scots) abdication. He became King of England and Ireland, as James I, in March 1603 (until his death in 1625) following the union of the English and Scottish crowns and after the death of the last of the Tudor monarchs, Elizabeth I. Under James I, the ‘Golden Age’ of Elizabethan literature and drama continued with writers such as Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson and later Webster, contributing to a flourishing literary culture. This of course, was all happening just after the English Reformation (1517-1564). Foreign settings, as in *The Duchess of Malfi*, allowed dramatists to explore inflammatory political and social issues of the day in relative safety, with geography, religion and time creating ample distance and removing immediacy. In the inflated character of the Cardinal, on the other hand, Webster was able to reflect the worst evils of ritualistic Roman Catholicism. Since the Reformation and England’s split from Rome, Italy had become associated with everything that was deemed corrupt and Webster included everything that would have been viewed as abhorrent by a Jacobean audience.

According to its original title page, *The Duchess of Malfi* was initially performed at both the Blackfriars Theatre and the Globe, quite likely during the same year, as the Globe was used for the warmer months and the Blackfriars for late autumn and winter. The very first production probably started out at the Blackfriars Theatre, as the Globe was being rebuilt after a fire and was unavailable until spring 1614. Recent research suggests that the playing conditions at these two venues may not have been as vastly dissimilar to one another as theatre historians once thought. Although smaller and far more intimate than the Globe, the Blackfriars Theatre, with a capacity of approximately 600, had many aspects of it akin to the Globe. Both playhouses had stages that were largely bare of props and scenery and both had upper playing areas and a curtained or screened ‘hiding/discovery space’ at the rear of the stage. This space would have been used, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, to conceal Cariola, possibly Bosola, and was almost certainly used for the highly theatrical and gruesome revelation of the waxen corpses of Antonio and the Duchess’ children.

Many theatre historians have tended to presume that another reason that the two playhouses would have produced very different versions of *The Duchess of Malfi* was that the private Blackfriars Theatre had a greater potential for sophisticated theatrical effects. Firstly, it was an indoor theatre which allowed far more in terms of both lighting and darkening the space through blacking out the windows. The Blackfriars Theatre also tended to use music as an indication of the passing of time between acts, but in actual fact, research suggests that by 1613-14, the Globe had adopted the Blackfriars custom of dividing plays into five acts with music both before the performance and between the acts. Although the Globe was lit by daylight and the Blackfriars Theatre by a combination of daylight and candlelight, neither venue allowed for more than the most minimal control of ambient lighting onstage. Any significant lighting changes essential to the plot, such as when Ferdinand visits the Duchess in darkness, would simply have been indicated by the bringing or dimming of a torch or lantern and not by any dramatic changes in the level of lighting onstage. The lessened visibility at the very rear of both stages would also have used to advantage in scenes such as when Bosola accidentally stabs Antonio in his failure to recognise him. At both the Blackfriars Theatre and the Globe, plays were usually staged during the afternoon and the visceral effect of tragedy onstage may well have been enhanced at both venues by the gradual setting of the sun as the play drew to a close.



The Globe and the Blackfriars Theatre attracted very different audiences from one another. The latter, situated within the city of London itself, charged higher prices and was more easily accessible to the well-off, the fashion-conscious and to students of the Inns of Court, where Webster himself possibly once studied. The Globe, on the south side of the Thames, was cheaper and tended to attract citizens and their wives with a smaller quotient of gentlemen and their ladies, gallants and courtiers. The Red Bull Theatre in Clerkenwell, where Webster's *The White Devil* premiered, was thought to have drawn similar audiences to that of the Globe, perhaps explaining in some part why Webster's first work was not received well. The larger, open-air theatres allowed for a far more diverse range of patronage and one that was perhaps not as well educated nor as attentive as Webster had hoped for.

Until the reign of Charles II, in 1630, all theatrical performances were played out entirely by companies of men only. These companies often consisted of adolescent boys who were commonly cast in the female roles. Indeed, when *The Duchess of Malfi* was first performed in approximately 1614, the title role was most likely played by David Carnegie, a boy actor who was already playing women's roles within the company during the period in question. Richard Sharpe reprised the role a few years later at the age of about fourteen. This seems an undeniably ostentatious and daunting task to undertake for one so young, but the practice was commonplace – younger boys fulfilling the female roles of the time whilst they still had smaller frames and a more feminine vocal range. The production costs throughout much of the Renaissance theatre was relatively low. Minimal stage scenery and props were used and as discussed earlier, modern day theatrical effects such as sound and lighting were simply non-existent. The almost sole financial excess of the theatre was costuming. Looking the part of a king, a nobleman, a lord or a priest was integral to many of the plays at the time and perhaps most importantly elaborate gowns and cloaks were useful to disguise in some way the smaller boys playing women. Indeed much of a company's wealth could be found within its costumery.

Although, in reality, the Blackfriars Theatre and the Globe spaces may not have differed as dramatically as once thought, it does seem likely that Webster wrote *The Duchess of Malfi* with the Blackfriars Theatre in mind. Given the dark and brutal nature of the play and the many instances whereby the characters simply do not see or recognise things or even one another, the more enclosed and slightly dimmer atmosphere of the Blackfriars Theatre would seem to have been a more suitable host for such writing.

It is thought that the Mermaid Theatre in Puddle Dock, Blackfriars (now the Mermaid Conference Centre), built in 1951, stands on or very near the grounds where the Blackfriars Theatre once was. Almost directly opposite it is of course, the Globe.

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

MAJOR THEMES

Within *The Duchess of Malfi*, perhaps some of the striking themes are death and violence, honour, and power. Although depicted within a much heightened and extraordinary story, these themes still resonate today.

VIOLENCE AND DEATH

Continuing the trend set by the Elizabethan tragedies, Jacobean theatre audiences appeared to have a somewhat morbid obsession with death, violence and the macabre, and Webster certainly did not fail to deliver with *The Duchess of Malfi*. At the heart of the play, the Duchess herself appears to represent the very epitome of courage, bravery and an unyielding virtue and tenderness whilst all around her are volatile, corrupt and devious. Her brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, are from the onset cold, calculating and manipulative. Webster instils these traits not only to enhance the nobility of his leading heroine but to whet his audience's appetite for the undoubtedly gruesome acts to follow. It is this juxtaposition between his main characters that perhaps sets aside Webster from many of his contemporaries; *The Duchess of Malfi* is not merely a revenge tragedy satiating the Jacobean's love of death and disaster, but an interesting character study of virtue, integrity and love within a state of flux. Webster also manages to overturn classical conventions by focusing largely on women and their expected role within society.



It could be said that in many ways the character of Bosola ends up as an echo of the Duchess' integrity, albeit a very convoluted one. He hates himself for the ease with which he can be bought and made complicit with things he despises but he seems unable to curb his own obsessive enactment of the desires of those who pay him, until it is too late. His repeated self-condemnation over the moral compromises he makes through his duties as secret 'intelligencer' for the Cardinal and Ferdinand figures a similar complicity with the play's spectacles of violence on the part of the audience and the playwright. Webster uses theatre to expose the moral bankruptcy - the iconic display of mutilated bodies and the courtly antimasque of madmen. But the very enactments that expose the corrupt origins of spectacle also exploit its potential to entertain the audience. Webster's play, like the reluctantly parasitic Bosola, depends for its life on the very corruption that it simultaneously holds up for revulsion. We love to watch and hate ourselves for loving it, and we owe our recognition of the contamination of our response in large part to the self-contemplation of Bosola, who is curiously modern in his insights even as he also spouts platitudes of old fashioned morality. It is this thrill of witnessing atrocities played out live on stage that set apart Webster from his contemporaries; *The Duchess of Malfi* is still referred to as the play 'where everyone dies'. It could be argued that we do not necessarily need to see six people die on stage, nor a severed hand and seemingly real waxen corpses but the spectacle feeds our appetite for the gruesome as it did with audiences 400 years ago. As a modern audience and, due largely to a lack of regulation within the media, we have become desensitised to visual images associated with death and violence, yet if a play transports us back in time, as *The Duchess of Malfi* does, we can still appreciate the horrid thrill that a Jacobean audience would have relished.

HONOUR, FAITH AND POWER

The violence which unfolds as a direct result of the seemingly preposterous and essentially unfair ideals of honour concerning the Duchess and her brothers, in fact holds a mirror up to society today. The brothers' deep-rooted anguish at the thought of their sister marrying below her class is so vehemently present from the onset, though we (as a modern audience) perhaps struggle to understand, yet it undeniably echoes 'honour killings' today. This gives us a glimpse into a system of belief which is unwavering in its strength and one that was clearly present at the time Webster wrote his play. The dawn of the 17th century ushered in rapid social and political change to northern Europe. While a recognisably modern view of the world had been struggling against the inherited legacy of medieval Christianity throughout the 16th century, the early decades of the 17th witnessed an unstoppable period of transformation. The new Protestant churches had established themselves as serious challenges to the theological and political claims of Roman Catholicism. Different people reacted to this, and other wide-ranging changes, in different ways. Some became religious extremists, prepared to kill and die for their theological beliefs. Some actively indulged in the speculative delights of the new economy, getting rich quickly by climbing over or otherwise disposing of human and moral obstacles; others angrily rallied against the unfairness and immorality of this early form of capitalism. In England, some went out of their way to maintain what they believed to be the ancient dignity of the system of social class and inheritance, with its concentration of ultimate power in the figure of the monarch; others mounted a violently radical challenge to the foundation of that system. This world of religious, economic and political uncertainty, then, was the context in which Jacobean tragedy emerged, enjoying an initial period of explosive popularity.

The stubborn assumptions of faith, belief and a particular moral code are indeed still present today, so the scorn of the Duchess' brothers and their concrete determination to uphold their family's honour may not be as farfetched as perhaps it would seem. Their cruelty therefore serves as both a dramatic tool to heighten the integrity of Webster's heroine but also gives a modern day audience an insight into the horror that ultimate power and control within a family can lead to. As a prior juxtaposition to this however, Webster puts the power structure in a fresh light; the unusual sight of a woman wielding male privileges makes starkly apparent what the accepted structures are and how they work normally to privilege men - especially so when males are represented as so passionately hostile and oppressive as her brothers are here. This gender role-reversal of power can also be seen through Antonio - he is exposed to the social and cultural subjection commonly experienced by women; as the Duchess sets out to woo him she reverses the gender-roles in which the man takes the initiative in courtship. In doing so, she also breaks the social and political constraints that require those of noble blood to marry their equals.

INCEST

In case waxen corpses, severed hands, 'werewolf-ism' and adultery weren't enough, *The Duchess of Malfi* also touches on incestuous relationships. Ferdinand is strangely enamoured with his sister whilst at the same time spurning her for her power and the decisions she makes. His incestuous longings appear to be borne out of greed. He is an overwhelmingly volatile and passionate character and the sheer strength of his emotions at times leads to complete desire of his sister. A controversial and taboo topic, Webster's intentions by including such a suggestion seem to indicate, yet again, the Jacobean's hunger for the strange or grotesque. Ferdinand's incestuous desires are only hinted at within the text however, so the true nature of them, or their backstory as it were, is never fully disclosed. We can only assume that in a man such as Ferdinand his greed and animalistic urges stretch to encompass and dominate all those in his path; and in this case, the stumbling block to his omnipotent power and wealth is the Duchess herself. The fabulous imagery associated with Ferdinand being afflicted by lycanthropy only serves to heighten this greed.



THE SKULL BENEATH THE SKIN

Assistant Director Simon Evans takes audiences behind the scenes to offer an insight into intense and absorbing rehearsals for *The Duchess of Malfi*.

The setting is incongruous. The Old Vic rehearsal room is full of optimism and spring sun, not to mention the smell of croissants and fresh coffee, as Director Jamie Lloyd welcomes cast and company. After 50 people introduce themselves in a rapid-fire roll-call, we listen, rapt, while Jamie describes his passion for John Webster's 'dark, sexy, violent and cruel masterpiece.' He conveys his profound respect for the playwright's words and his intention to unlock themes of class, nobility and ambition that are integral to the play. We murmur appreciatively, mentally checking off the horrors the narrative has in store for us, until Jamie stops us in our tracks by adding how much 'hope' he has found in the play.

Hope and nobility seem, to the assembled company at least, strange words to use in connection with Webster's nihilistic and primal piece. In the early 19th century, Charles Lamb had cautioned William Hazlitt about his desire to mount a production of *The Duchess of Malfi*, stating that the horrors depicted were severe. It 'touches the soul to the quick,' he wrote, and 'lays upon fear as much as it can bear'; indeed so troubling was the considered subject matter that there had not been a London production for almost 100 years. The last recorded staging, in an adaptation by Lewis Theobald, titled *The Fatal Secret* (1735), had followed Nahum Tate's *King Lear* example with an altered ending, allowing the Duchess and Antonio to survive (with brood) and head off into the Mediterranean sunset. But the play had no courage without Webster's ending and it wasn't until 1850 that another heavily revised version would play in London, this time at Sadler's Wells. Indeed, it was really T S Eliot who returned Webster to the spotlight in the 1920s, praising him (in a poem) for his capacity to see 'the skull beneath the skin' of man.

This obsession with death infuses much of Webster's work, imbuing the characters, environments and language with a fatalistic quality. Jamie's expression of 'hope', therefore, seems inapposite on this first day, especially when we crowd around Soutra Gilmour's model box, an atmospheric and skeletal mesh of spires and beams in which spies and shadows can vie for space. Then there is her mood board, a threatening collection of carnival masks and hooded figures evoking this *danse macabre Malfi*.

But as soon as the pastries are cleared and rehearsals begin, it becomes apparent that Jamie's approach is going to call into question many of our preconceptions. Webster's words shall be brought to the fore, says Jamie, with his language 'the biggest thing in the room'. This is a refreshing and, possibly, controversial decision because Webster has often been regarded as Shakespeare's slightly vulgar sibling, delivering the 'pulp fiction' equivalent of the Bard's more subtle poetry. His plots are driven by an almost adolescent fascination with blood, dismemberment and incest while his verse plays fast and loose with any regular or established metrical system, thrusting feminine cadences against masculine endings like a literary dating agency.



Still, two weeks into rehearsals, and the impact of Jamie's approach illuminates every scene and character as we begin to hear words so often mumbled, sung or generally lost in elaborate staging, declamation and interpretation. Now we are appreciating themes typically glossed over in the mad rush to bloodshed. Two sessions with vocal coach Barbara Houseman help, with the company playing and plying the verse, while we spectators hear the language soar and the work come to life. There are no editions of *No Fear Webster* (as there are for every Shakespeare play) offering a modern-English paraphrase of the verse, and synopses usually skim over huge passages of revelatory language to get to the more narrative-driven murders and betrayals; yet, under Jamie's guidance, we find the seeds of tenderness in Mark Bonnar's lines significantly earlier than his character Bosola's supposed Act 4 *volte-face*. Close work unpicking the meaning of the atrocities that Ferdinand lists so graphically leads us to appreciate that a chillingly clear delivery gives Harry Lloyd more power than volume ever could, and we hang on Eve Best's use of Webster's complex metre in her final scenes, enjoying the reward of unfettered access to her complicated Duchess. *The Duchess of Malfi* is a violent play, filled with barbarity, but to hear Tom Bateman as Antonio intone, 'She stains the time past, lights the time to come', you hear behind the words a writer more than capable of holding his own in Shakespearean company when it comes to crafting 'vain poetry' as well as 'intemperate anger'.

Inevitably this pursuit of pure Webster raises its own problem. In contemporary productions where high-concept visuals rather than narrative drive the staging process, an audience might sit back, contented to let the aesthetic and music of the Jacobean language wash over them, oblivious to the complexities of the original story, thereby relieving a cast of the responsibility of unpicking difficult questions that inform this play. Jamie's insistence on clear exposition, on the other hand, presents these questions to the audience directly and demands that we, as a company, find solutions. So it is, at the top of our second week, that Jamie again speaks of class, social hierarchy and ambition and suggests that an understanding of this, and its crucial importance in the era, could offer us so much more access to the characters and their actions. So I begin supplying background information on the structure of the Holy Roman ducal court, tossing out phrases gleaned from Baldassare Castiglione's guide *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), while Ann Yee uses her movement sessions to put these ideas into physical expression. We follow with Renaissance dance sessions where lessons in the pavane give an insight into the strict structure of the social hierarchy, providing Jamie with further devices to introduce his 21st-century audience to a world where honour is not an antique concept, but a life and death issue. Suddenly the play opens up, revealing itself to us.

'A visor and a mask are whispering rooms, That were never built for goodness,' Ferdinand advises his sister, the Duchess. As Jamie's staging and the company's understanding heighten, the court corridors of 16th century Italy present themselves to us, peopled with princes, courtiers, the treacherous and the greedy. 'Ambition... is a great man's madness,' Antonio observes and in a Cardinal who urges 'nor anything without the addition, honour, Sway your high blood', and a Prince who promises to 'purge the infected blood' of his family tree, we suddenly understand the mindset behind the brothers' brutality; 'fortune' refers to both money and the future, so men like Antonio, who are 'too low built', and a Duchess who's 'Grown a notorious strumpet', become 'the stars' tennis balls, struck and banded, Which way please them' in the name of *honour*.

Suddenly the walls are covered in contemporary articles on honour killings. The reports of sisters, daughters, wives and babies, killed around the world by family members in the name of honour (at least two a week in Istanbul alone we read) sober the rehearsal room entirely; we understand that nothing in Webster's play is more grotesque or violent than the world it mirrored then and still mirrors now.

And yet, Jamie reminds us, there is hope. The more we read the play, the more we realise how apt T S Eliot was in praising Webster's ability to see the skull beneath the skin. As much as it refers to Webster's fascination with death, it is also a metaphor for the rotten workings beneath the veneer of a Renaissance society that he portrays so well. In Jamie's world, these two concepts merge together as we see, in Bosola, a growing understanding of death as the great leveller of society's artificial hierarchies. We are presented with Cardinals, Lords, Princes, Counts, Dukes and Duchesses but 'Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, Like diamonds, we are cut with our own dust'.

Sitting with Mark Bonnar, Jamie explains that Bosola eventually accepts Delio's observation that 'Integrity of life is fame's best friend'. In the midst of a society characterised by Webster as corrupt and superficial, Bosola digs below the skin and even through the bone until he meets and understands the Duchess. 'She is the heart,' Jamie suggests, 'of the play and the society'; in finding and understanding her, Bosola is offered an image of pure virtue and integrity quite alien to his world.

So there is hope.
Hopefully.

SOUTRA GILMOUR DESIGNER

What attracted you to designing *The Duchess of Malfi*?

I've always wanted to do *The Duchess of Malfi*. I think when I was seventeen I did it as an A-level text and I loved it for its really dense visual imagery, all the references to nature, the rich colours and textures, and all of those things that were in the language; and, of course, the heightened, extraordinary nature of the story. It just felt like something that had a huge visual world. At school I was interested in History, English, Art and the History of Art and *The Duchess of Malfi* as a text somehow speaks to all of those ideas. It was a play that really summed up my interests and my reasons for going into theatre design. I've spent the last 15 years doing new writing and 20th century plays, so as soon as it came up as a potential opportunity, I said I would absolutely love to do it.

How does the designer/director relationship normally work for you?

I first worked with Jamie about six years ago; he'd seen a lot of productions where he really liked my design, so we realised we had a common interest and an emotional connection through the work. It's great for me because there's trust in the relationship and freedom in it so I can take a very front-footed approach to how the production is going to be and the aesthetic of it. Obviously there's a lot of cross-fertilisation between the director and the designer but the designer has to come up with an offer first. Sometimes Jamie would have a different take on photos I sent him which is what happened in *The Duchess of Malfi*; he really liked an aerial shot and wondered if there were some way of making it look from the front as it looks like from above and that's where the 'slanty wall' came from – by a fluke of perspective of that aerial shot.

Was there a particular visual image that you based your design on?

I got very interested early on in the Pre-Raphaelite period partly because they were looking back at that period between Elizabethan and Jacobean, but I also got very interested in Victorian architecture; William Morris, Rosetti and the 'arts and craft' movement. I had a look at three-tiered libraries with spiral staircases, ballustrades and bridges because I knew I was looking for some sort of structure that in some way reflected the auditorium of The Old Vic. Rather than it feeling like an auditorium and a set, I wanted to integrate the two things which is why we've come out beyond the Proscenium Arch. I also looked at film productions like Batman and Gotham City in the 1930s because of the scale of what I wanted to do. I had all these images and I melted them all together to create our piece of architecture which is part Italian Renaissance, part Victorian, part Elizabethan, part Gotham City. It's become an invented architecture which has integrated all of those things whilst merging with The Old Vic auditorium in order to bring the play forwards and into our experience of the world. It's not about making it modern because we're sitting in an auditorium that is clearly not modern, watching a play from 400 years ago but it's still an experience we're having right now, so it's that fine line of finding a way to be truthful to the play but somehow making it very real and vibrant for a completely contemporary audience.

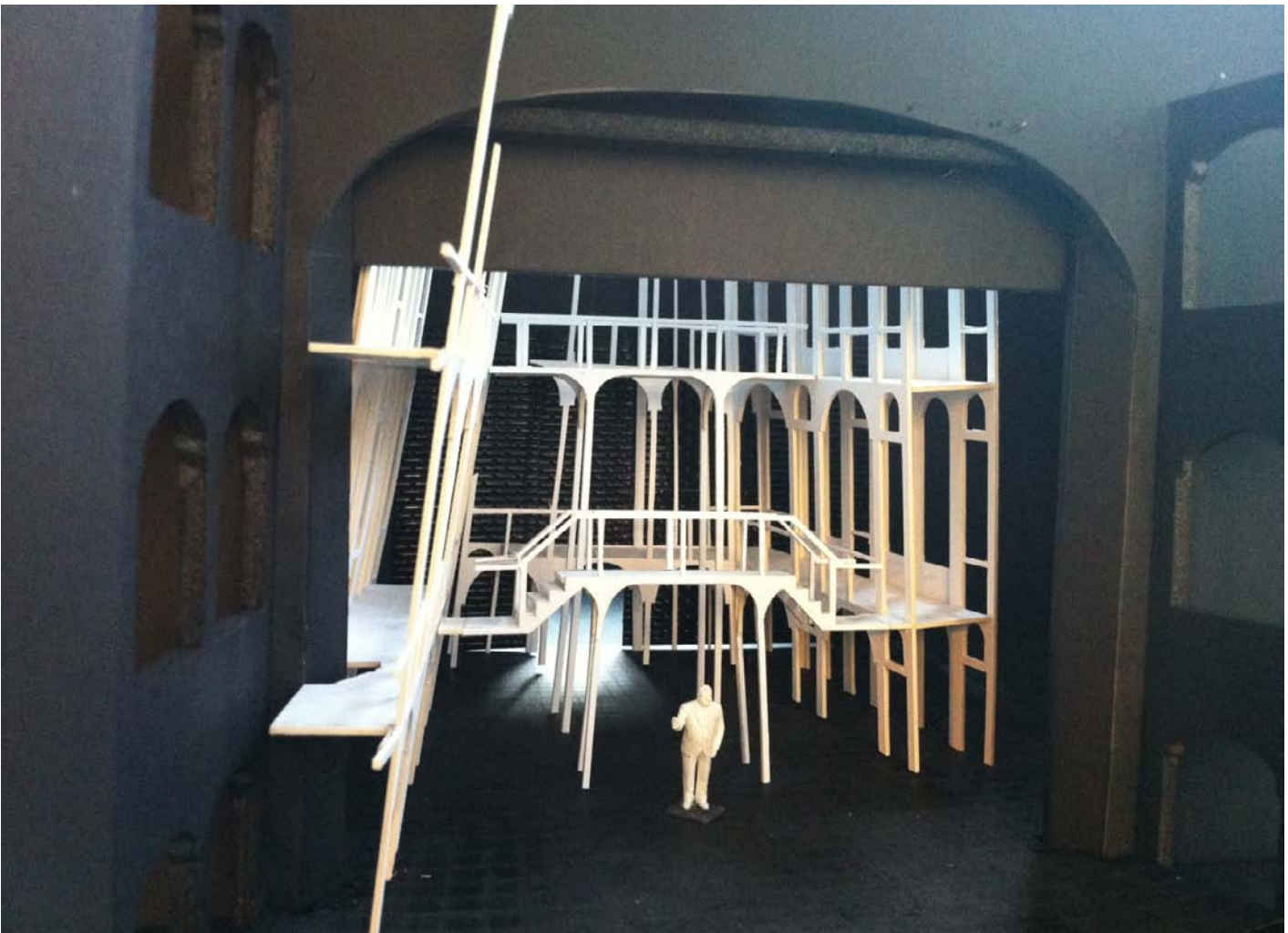
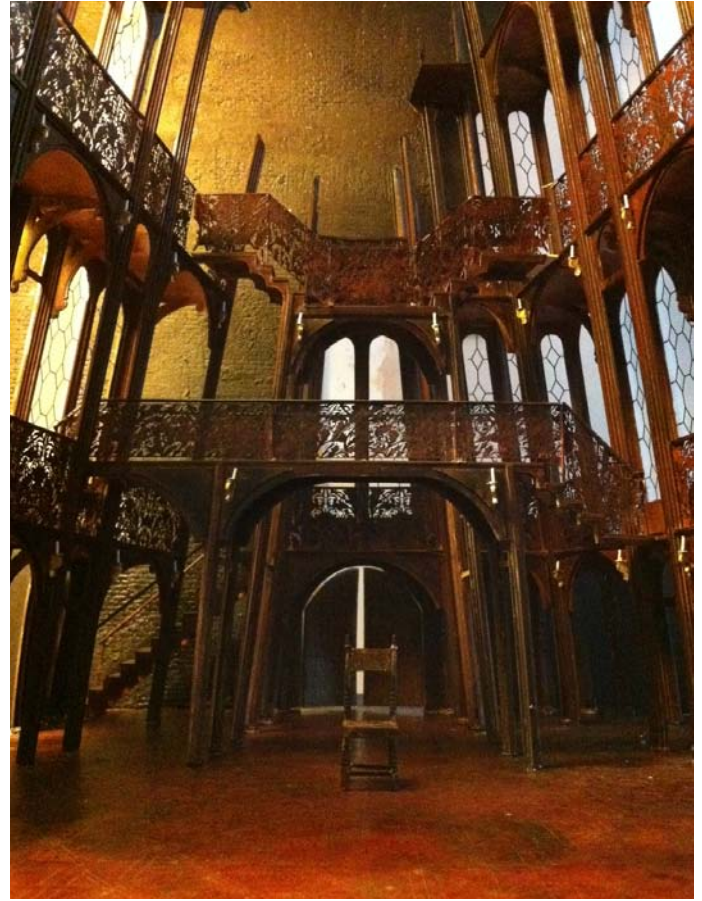
Tell us about your costume choices.

I wanted them to feel like they were in the period but there were two or three things that I wanted to change in order to create a slightly more heightened world. The Cardinal was very specific for me; our Cardinal needed to feel like a military man, upright, frightening and sharper. He is still wearing a cassock and a cape but the hood and the overcoat were our own addition. We also wanted something more filmic so we added the cloaks to give a much more menacing, dark quality to it. I wanted to create costumes that made you more aware of the person and less aware of the costume, so I made something much more streamlined and acceptable to modern audiences.

Any words of wisdom for young designers?

If you absolutely want to do it, you have to stick to it and give yourself no alternative. Take every opportunity that comes your way because you never know what you're going to enjoy. You can have very narrow views on what you think you'll like or not like, whereas actually the truth is some things may take you by surprise. It's all about how invested you are in the activity of making a world. It's also about developing the social skills to be able to interact with carpenters, actors, costume-makers, directors etc because the designer is the one person who talks with *everybody*. A huge part of what it is to be a designer is to be a manager of huge teams of people – you're never their employer but often you're their boss in some way!





EVE BEST 'THE DUCHESS'

What attracted you to the role of The Duchess?

It's a very famous role; a milestone of a role because it's so challenging. There are very few plays where a woman has the title role - that's not to say she has the most lines by a long stretch but to find a play where the story revolves around a female protagonist is very exciting. It terrified me beyond belief and, as a result, I knew I had to do it. Secondly, I'd wanted to come back to The Old Vic for ages and thirdly, I'd never worked with Jamie, so it was a combination of those three things which made it an 'unturndownable' opportunity.

What was the biggest challenge for you within this role?

One of the very biggest challenges is the language and how difficult it is. I've done Shakespeare but I couldn't believe how much more difficult this is to understand, to learn, to get into your skin. Somehow Shakespeare is rhythmically much more conducive to an immediate 'soaking in' to one's self and is comparatively more accessible but Webster is like trying to learn Chinese. The rhythms are so jagged and so consistently inconsistent. Even just the sounds in the mouth are so much more brutal; you're aware so much of the consonants and how jagged and crunchy they are. It's incredibly visceral. I thought, naively, that I must think about what's going on inside her head - rubbish! I spent the whole time just trying to learn the lines.



How did you approach these initial problems?

My friend said to me Webster is to Shakespeare like the Rolling Stones are to the Beatles. The Beatles use lovely rhythm and poetry but then the Stones come along and everything is a bit madder, darker, torn up and much less tuneful. But it is all there, you just have to search for it and that was incredibly exciting and when the play unlocked for me. What was really nice was not being psychological about it at all. Of course, the ideas and the story require a lot of discussion about metaphysical things like life after death yet, at the same time, the process that I'm still going through at the moment is that it's outside in. You're just doing the steps, playing the language. The closest thing I've done to this is Pinter; the gaps are so huge and he doesn't present answers. The desire is so strong to join the dots but you have to let the audience do that. It's only my job to present this language as it is written. I have to keep on the language, keep on the thought because actually there's no space to worry about anything else. It's about being physically and mentally very disciplined.

What have you discovered about the Duchess?

Jamie asked me early on if she's like a female Hamlet and I thought 'Oh God...!'; then I thought 'No, she's not', psychologically she's the polar opposite. The thing that struck me immediately about her as a character is that she's the epitome of the feminine. Everything about Hamlet is to 'not do' whereas everything about her is 'doing'. She acts first and the consequences? Well, let's just see what happens, which is an ultimately feminine thing. That's why the brothers are so threatened by her; she is the woman. She's everything, she's human. According to Antonio, she's impossibly perfect. According to her brothers, she's the most appalling whore that's ever existed. According to Bosola, she's a box of worm seed and a sort of pointless animal. But she is just a woman. She is flesh and blood; completely flawed and completely perfect at the same time.

What's it like being back at The Old Vic?

Lovely. Just lovely. It's been about five years since *Moon for the Misbegotten* and I love the Vic so much so it's like coming home. We get on really well as a cast because it's so intense and dark, we're all incredibly jolly backstage. It's a very ego-less, hardworking cast and we're all very supportive and generous, and funny! We broke the bed on stage last night and it was hysterically funny. There's a scene between Tom [Bateman, 'Antonio'] and I, and the bed collapsed and the whole audience burst out laughing. We all just stood and looked at each other in hysterics then we had to do the whole of this scene on this comedy collapsed bed. It was heaven!

HARRY LLOYD 'FERDINAND'

What made you want to be a part of this production?

First of all – Jamie. I've worked with him before and he's a great guy. In terms of the play, I think there's something about my character that is fascinating. There are times when it's so modern and times when it's so medieval and mad. He's a classic old-school baddie but even though Webster doesn't seem to chart any psychological, cohesive narrative for him, as an actor it's exciting to play a role that *does* contradict and jump and you've got to build these bridges. I spent a lot of time piecing it together and fighting against the shouty performance and trying to colour him. It feels like the first half of the play is a thriller and the second half is a circus act.

What have you discovered about your character?

There are times I certainly felt for him – he's done all these horrible things and when you cannot face these immovable feelings and facts, that's when you go mad. But I actually first thought when you've done all these things, you've got to take responsibility for them and if he's not mad, it's a brilliant way of getting out of a situation. He's clearly got a lot of sexual preoccupation. Him [not wanting the Duchess to remarry] is not about reputation as it is for the Cardinal, but about sex. Something is eating him inside from the very beginning. I initially thought that he doesn't have to be this horrible villain, but Jamie said in week two something that changed everything – if we, the audience, are not scared of him, this play does not work. No matter how interesting and sympathetic you make him, that's the drama of the play. He's already on the edge and you have to push him even further. It's a play that keeps wrong-footing you.



What do you think of his incestuous nature?

There are lots of possible ideas and answers. In the original text, they [the Duchess and Ferdinand] are meant to be twins. I think there's a difference with incest between twins and incest between a younger brother and an older sister. It actually makes it very interesting, working out the story of our version, especially with the Cardinal being older than her and our parents not being there, in a way she's my mother. When she married, that's when I grew up politically and took the Dukedom and learnt how to use people. I think the kiss that we have *is* shocking and that's why he says I'll never see you again because this is the stuff that spikes men.

How did you find the language of the play?

The language he uses is very jagged and disgusting and visceral but it's also very powerful and clean. Especially with Ferdinand; the images he uses are quite ornate and various, he's got a really wide range of references. There's something very earthy and dangerous and sharp about the language. He [Ferdinand] has got a real wit and so often he finishes other peoples' lines. What I found difficult to begin with is that he's got no friends, there's no-one on his team, he's almost in a different play to everyone else. Every scene he's in is about trying to make people do something. I loved coming out on stage for the first time, after the rehearsal room, because you've got an audience – he's got someone to talk to and you have to work out the real truth of these disparate lines and then get good at joining them really quickly. To be brave enough to go out and be all 'wolfy' but to ground it in truth and be confident enough to bring it down a level. It's so grotesque and melodramatic.

Have you enjoyed the process so far?

There were times when I was a bit miserable and thinking 'I hate this guy, this is exhausting'. I couldn't work out what people were going to get when they watched this play but I'm fascinated by their reactions. Someone saw the first preview, then saw it again and said that it *has* evolved and that 'you're much sweeter but more dangerous'. As a company, on stage, we're hearing it new all the time and not getting stuck in that sing-songy phase; we've got the clarity of it but people are still listening. I was scared of The Old Vic initially because it's a big old theatre but now I'm so happy we're here because it's a play big enough for it, it suits it so well and I wouldn't want it to be anywhere else.

FINBAR LYNCH 'THE CARDINAL'

What attracted you to this production?

I've not done any Webster, any Jacobean drama. I've done a lot of Shakespeare and some of his contemporaries; I love working on stuff from that period. I've seen this play and *The White Devil* so I was interested in exploring something like *The Duchess of Malfi*; I think Jamie's done a great job on his cutting of it. And I love The Old Vic, I've worked here before on *Dancing At Lughnasa*.

Were there any major challenges for you?

I've never made an entrance on a bed and I thought that was going to be trickier than it is! When I first read it, I thought the Cardinal was not on much but what he says is very well written and interesting, so there's a challenge in that too. I remember reading an interview with Ralph Richardson, at The Old Vic, and he said when you're playing a big part, you've got a lot of targets and you can hit a few and miss a few. But when you're in a smaller role you've got to get it right every time you're on, so that's the challenge.

What do you think of your character?

The Cardinal's very controlling. He doesn't have a high opinion of women. At the end, when he says he doesn't want to be remembered, he discovers too late that maybe he's had the wrong approach. Some of the stuff I do, I feel that I have to keep checking with the other actors that it's ok because it's really got to be a joint decision otherwise it could be very uncomfortable. But it seems to have been collaborative all the way along; the lines of communication have been open so that Jamie and Kate [the fight director] have all been very much involved in any physical business that we have.

How have you found Webster's use of language?

Webster and Shakespeare were writing around the same period. Shakespeare was not a unique phenomenon, he was very much part of a movement, a whole group of people that were writing at a particular time and Webster was one of them. They cross reference each other all the time and they all had a grammar school education; they were all schooled in Latin and the Classics and that informs the way they write. Also, what they're writing about and the structure of the plays they wrote was influenced by classical drama. There's maybe not as much heightened metaphor [as Shakespeare] but it's very much in the same school. Webster's take on the world is very dark. When the Cardinal says 'I would pray now but the devil takes away my heart for having any confidence in prayer'; this was at a time when everybody, on paper anyway, believed in a Christian God so that must have been surprising to hear on stage from a Cardinal. It's important to listen with half an ear in those times [when the play was written] so you can get a sense of the impact that those thoughts and ideas would have had. If you listen to it, you still can be surprised at how bleak their take on life is

How are you coping with your injury? [Finbar broke his collarbone during previews]

That's the amazing thing about theatre. I've been in a play where there are no understudies and somebody's off so someone else goes on with a book; the audience find that very profound and that there's something unique happening that they're a part of. It's amazing to me the fact that this sling has gone down so well – so much of it is all in the audience's minds. So I think when I get better I'm going to keep the leather sling!



THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

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